# THE CHURCH AND ITS MEMBERS

*by*

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## *Who are Members of the Church?*

WHO are members of the Church? If we believe, as all Christians must, that the Church is the Body of Christ, in which we share his life, and through which he himself works, it is a matter of the greatest importance for us to know that we are in fact true members of it.

We had better begin by seeing clearly what we ought to mean by the word "Church." It is that Society whose Head is Christ himself. It was founded by him. Its members are not all in this world; the greater number of them have already died and passed out of that part of the Church which we call "militant here on earth." It is into that whole Society, in this world and beyond it, that we are admitted when we become members of the Church of God.

There is only one Church, in the primary sense of the word. We can of course speak about a local part of the Church by the same name—"the Church of England," or "the Church in London"; but when we do so we are only saying that in a particular locality we find a part of the whole Church, which expresses the life of the whole.

Or we can call a building a church. When we do this, we mean that it is a place where a part of the Church (in the primary sense of the word) meets for its worship.

Putting aside these two senses, and concentrating on that primary meaning, we are bound to say that there is only one Church. There is "one Body, and one Spirit." To speak of "Churches" in the plural is like using the plural of the word "God"—when we do so, we change the meaning of the word.

In the Creeds we describe the Church by four adjectives : we say it is one, holy, Catholic and apostolic. It is *one* because there is only one Body of which our Lord is the Head. It is *holy*, because God has called it out of the world to live by his grace. It is *Catholic*, because it is for all men and nations, and teaches the Christian faith in its wholeness. It is *apostolic* as founded in the persons of the twelve Apostles, and deriving its authority and mission through them.

The Church on earth does not enjoy any of these qualities in its perfection. Its unity is imperfect, when its members may be divided and estranged from each other. Its holiness is impaired by the sins of the members. Its catholicity does not mean that every member of the human race actually belongs to it. Its apostolicity is marred by breaches of Church order and fellowship. Nevertheless, the four characteristics of the Church remain, for they are qualities which come from Christ's institution, and the Church has therefore a superhuman power of recovery after periods when it has been in some way corrupted.

### *The Meaning of Baptism*

Men are admitted into the Church, grafted into its living structure, by the Sacrament of Baptism. It is true that there are limitations to our admittance to all the privileges of Church membership until we have also received Confirmation, a rite which we now commonly separate from Baptism itself, but this is a matter into which we need not now enter. If we do not enjoy to the full the privileges of our Church membership until after our Confirmation, we are in any case within the Christian Body because we are baptized.

Can we lose our Christian membership ? The answer to this is to some degree a matter of words. If a Christian becomes an atheist, we can clearly say that he is no longer a Christian. All the same, the Church does not treat

him as one who has never been baptized. If he recovers his faith, he can be reconciled to the Church. What cannot happen is that he should be baptized again. It would be truer to say therefore that he has been a lapsed Christian during the period of his unbelief.

The loss of faith is not the only cause of such lapses. A man may continue to believe in the faith of the Church, and yet, simply because he intends to follow the evil courses of a sinful life, may deliberately separate himself from the Church's fellowship. On his repentance, he too may be restored ; but he will not be baptized again.

There are others, unfortunately a great number in our own land, who have no deliberate intention of dissociating themselves from the Church, but who are slack and indifferent about their Christian responsibilities. At certain times they may turn to the Church for its ministrations, but most of their lives is lived without much vital connexion with the Christian fellowship. There are clearly many degrees of such slackness. The Church has many defaulting members—but they are still members, by virtue of their Baptism.

Not all separation from the normal sphere of the Church's life comes from the sin of the separated. There are many who have been baptized into the Body of the Church, and subsequently brought up in separated groups of Christians. Their teachers may be persons of great personal devotion and goodness, themselves brought up in the same way. These separated Christians may rightly feel a great attachment to the persons, and the organization, from which they have learned to love God and serve his Son, even though they may have an inadequate understanding of the meaning of the Church in God's purposes. Through no fault of their own they are separated Christians.

*What is Schism?*

Clearly it is possible to separate oneself from sharing in the fellowship of the Church's life. Such separation

is called Schism. It may be blameworthy, as when it is the result of man's wilfulness. It may be free from blame, as with those who have never known of, or never understood, any alternative to the separated life they lead. It may indeed by the result of the sins of Christians who have themselves remained in the ordinary life of the Church, but who have by their lives caused others to disbelieve in its divine origin and authority.

Can there be schism within the Church ? The answer again depends on the use of words. Clearly there can be degrees of separation between those who belong to the one Church. In the Middle Ages, the Church in the West was sometimes divided through following the lead of rival Popes. During the first thousand years of Christianity, the Church was often divided, the east from the west, for periods of varying length ; and for the last nine hundred years the separation of east and west has been continuous. This would certainly mean that one or the other part had separated itself from the Church's unity, if the whole Church were the Church on earth. What matters at least equally is whether each part has maintained its unity with the whole Body of the Church, and with the Church's Head, by its continuance in the faith and order which are essential to it.

The Church of England, with its sister Churches of the Anglican Communion, has for four hundred years been separated from the Catholics of the Roman obedience, and from the Churches of the East. With regard to the latter, the separation has been partly due to geographical remoteness, and both sides have shown considerable willingness to draw closer together. Today there are also political difficulties to be overcome, which are due to causes beyond the control of the two groups concerned.

With regard to the separation from Catholics of the Roman obedience, we have to recognize that while the

English Church looks forward to the possibility of restored fellowship in the future, it sees in the claims made for the See of Roman obstacles which cannot be removed from our side.

*Our Nonconformist Brothers*

For people living in England it is inevitable to ask what is the position of those large bodies of people who are members of what they themselves call the Free Churches. There are in fact two questions which arise ; the first, are such people individually members of the one Church ; and the second, are the bodies to which they belong corporate parts of that Church ?

If Baptism is the door into the Church, then all Nonconformists who have been duly baptized are in virtue of their Baptism members of the Catholic Church. There are of course some Nonconformists who have not been baptized (and some Nonconformist bodies which do not use the Sacrament of Baptism at all), and of such persons we are bound to say that they have not been admitted to the Church, although they may be sincere followers of our Lord in the way that they believe to be right. Of the rest, a large proportion have in fact been baptized in their parish churches ; others have been properly baptized by their own ministers. If they have, then they were actually made members of the Catholic Church, though a Churchman is bound to regard their subsequent way of life defective. That implies no judgment on their sincerity or goodness of life ; it means that in so far as the Church on earth has a developed organization, and an organization which continues on earth "the Apostles' fellowship," such persons have not fully continued in it.

The organizations themselves, the Free Churches, raise varied problems. One of the most influential of them, the Methodist Church, began as a Society without

any claim to be a Church, and without challenging the position of the Church of England. Others come down from the Reformation period, when their first members regarded the Church of England as corrupt and un-Scriptural, a false Church to be replaced by one on a purer and better model. At least one, the Salvation Army, has made little use of Church-phraseology, though it takes the place of a Church in the minds of its adherents.

For a Churchman, the right approach is to begin with the character of the Church as God gave it to us. It is the " givenness " of the Church's faith and order which is our dearest inheritance. We believe that the Church of Christ is by his institution dependent upon the Apostles, and therefore dependent upon the order of Bishops in which the Apostolic authority has been perpetuated on earth. We cannot therefore regard a Ministry which has a different origin as being the same as that which the Catholic Church received from its Lord, and which was first challenged in the Reformation period. We welcome the growth of a " Church-sense " among our separated brothers, but we regard it as a growing understanding which will reach its true goal only when they are restored to unity with the order of Bishops. We recognize that Free-Churchmen have much in common with us in matters of belief, but we hold also that any faith is defective in so far as it falls short of the acceptance of what the Church has believed through the ages, and in all its parts.

When separated bodies were set up in the Reformation period, they rejected the authority of the Church of England. The Methodists declined to accept it at a later stage. Whatever the provocation may have been, and whatever political confusions influenced the decisions of different groups, we are forced to the conclusion that there was schism from the duly constituted Church, and that this schism has in fact continued.

It is the duty of Churchpeople to be as sympathetic as can be to the position of those who have learned all that they know of Christ and his Gospel outside their own communion. It would however only lead to bitterness and misunderstanding if we concealed our own belief that Christ gave us a Church with a divine authority, and that this authority is expressed in definite organs of the Church's life. To Churchmen the Bishop is the representative of the rest of the Church in one diocese, and the representative of that diocese in the whole Church. There can be no corporate organic Church life in separation from him.

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